

Chapter 5

Bunburying in Leitrim: John McGahern's *Amongst Women* and *That They May*

Face the Rising Sun

Of all the writers to have emerged from Ireland in the twentieth century, John McGahern is one of the least likely (on the surface at least) to have been influenced by Oscar Wilde. Where Wilde wrote sparkling plays concerning the aristocracy in Victorian England, John McGahern wrote about the rural Irish peasants in Leitrim and Roscommon. While Wilde's style was one of epigrams and one-liners, McGahern wrote in an unadorned and bare style that is very reminiscent of the early works of James Joyce.¹ Leaving such obvious differences aside, however, there are many points of contact between Wilde and McGahern that I hope to elucidate in the upcoming pages. In his 1979 novel, *The Pornographer*, the character of Maloney sums up his views concerning art with the maxim: "Art was art because it was not nature".² This theory of art is, as Denis Sampson has pointed out, a "repetition of Oscar Wilde's ideas from "Intentions".³ The essay in the volume *Intentions* that Maloney is indebted to for his artistic opinions is "The Decay of Lying" in which Wilde makes clear what he regards as distinctions between art and life. Wilde is of the opinion that "the more we study Art the less we care for nature" ("Decay", *CCW*, 1071), since nature is imperfect but art has the ability to recreate the

¹ For a good general overview of the other writers (apart from Wilde) that McGahern is indebted to, see Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern* (Dublin: Lilliput, 1993), 1-32.

² John McGahern, *The Pornographer*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 27.

³ Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*, 143 n9.

world in a more perfect form. The proving of art's superiority to life is in fact one of the primary aims of *The Pornographer*.⁴

McGahern echoes Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" quite strikingly in his own 1968 essay, "The Image", in which he wrote these often quoted lines:

Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on this situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable.⁵

Those lines from "The Image" have certain similarities with the following passage from Wilde's "The Decay of Lying":

Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness in the man who looks at her." ("Decay", *CCW*, 1071).

⁴ In an unpublished paper entitled, "Pornography and the Decay of Lying", Stanley van der Ziel discusses how *The Pornographer* distinguishes the sphere of art from the realm of life. This paper primarily discusses how McGahern was influenced by the writings and theories of Flaubert and Proust but Wilde is also mentioned as being an influence on the theme art vs. nature that is one of the central concerns of *The Pornographer*.

⁵ John McGahern, "The Image". *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991). Special Issue on McGahern, 13.

This idea of art as having a godlike, religious quality is mentioned once again by McGahern in his *Memoir* when he is describing the epiphany that led to his decision to become an artist rather than a priest as his late mother had wished him to be:

Why take on any single life—a priest, a soldier, teacher, doctor, airman—if a writer could create all these worlds far more vividly? In that one life of the mind, the writer could live many lives and all of life”.⁶

In *Memoir*, McGahern makes a very direct reference to a Wildean epigram. When McGahern’s father demands that his daughter pay him a part of her salary every month as reimbursement for all the money that he has spent on her over the years, it is agreed that John (or Sean as he is referred to throughout the course of this work) should write the reply which Rosaleen will then take and copy out in her own handwriting and send to her father. McGahern says of this task of impersonating his sister that it “delighted me: the masks set me free”.⁷ This reference to masks is a very clear reworking of a line from Wilde’s essay “The Critic as Artist”: “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth” (“Critic”; CCW, 1143). By not talking in his own person while he is writing his sister’s letter, McGahern is capable of expressing himself far more sincerely than he would have been able to if he had to speak

⁶ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 205. This scene has discernable similarities with the moment in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Stephen, after encountering the bird-girl on Dollymount Strand, decides to forsake the life of a priest for the artistic vocation of “recreat[ing] life out of life”. See James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 145. Both Dedalus and McGahern see art in the same way that Wilde did: A means of refashioning life into new forms.

⁷ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 229.

in his own voice since that would have exposed him to censure and reprisal from his brutish father. In 1894, Wilde wrote a letter in which he expanded on his theory of the necessity of masks. This letter may not have been familiar to John McGahern but it clearly outlines a view of the world that both he and Wilde certainly subscribed to:

To the world I [Wilde] seem, by intention on my part, a dilettante and dandy merely—it is not wise to show one's heart to the world—and as seriousness of manner is the disguise of the fool, folly in its exquisite modes of triviality... is the robe of the wise man. In so vulgar an age as this, we all need masks.⁸

It is, I would argue, not so unlikely that McGahern would have read Wilde's letters because they were published in 1962, when McGahern spent his summers in London, discussing books with the painter Patrick Swift.⁹

An indirect but, arguably, very deliberate reference to a Wildean text occurs in *Memoir* as early as page ten when McGahern describes how his father triumphantly carried in a newspaper the long curls that he had shaved off his son's (John McGahern's) head. According to McGahern: "Those curls came to resemble for me John the Baptist's severed head borne into the room on a silver plate".¹⁰ I would argue that, while Wilde is not mentioned this passage, McGahern is obliquely referring to Wilde's play *Salomé* which was illustrated by the artist Aubrey Beardsley who depicted John the Baptist's

⁸ Quoted in Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 186.

⁹ For a full account of the time McGahern spent in London, see McGahern's essay "The Bird Swift", in *PS...of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983*, ed. by Veronica Jane O'Mara (Oysterhaven, Co. Cork: Gandon Books, 1993), 147-55.

¹⁰ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 10.

decapitated head as having the same long flowing curls as McGahern describes in *Memoir*¹¹. McGahern's motive for imagining his hair as being similar to that of John the Baptist could very possibly be an attempt on his part to escape into the less oppressive world of art after having been subjected to the degrading experience of having his hair cut off by his father in the realm of reality. If this is the case, then that artistic sphere of existence that he wishes to retreat into was one fashioned by Oscar Wilde. The sentence in *Memoir* that directly follows this comparison might seem to contradict this argument and thus needs to be addressed: "Religion and religious imagery were part of the air we breathed".¹² This seems to suggest that McGahern was inspired by purely religious texts when he thought of John the Baptist. However, it must be remembered that, for John McGahern, art and religion were practically intertwined entities. This is made apparent when he talks about why he did not feel guilty about giving up the life of a priest to become a writer: "Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the god of a small, vivid world".¹³ Thus, when McGahern talks about religion, it is quite reasonable to suggest that he is also talking about art.

The fact that McGahern compares himself (via his cut hair) to John the Baptist rather than to the more obvious biblical character of Sampson who had his hair cut and his great strength removed by the treacherous Delilah, suggests that he was attempting to aestheticize his somewhat ignominious life by aligning himself with a figure who was

¹¹ A reproduction of this illustration can be found in the essay "Distance, death and desire in *Salome*" by Joseph Donohue in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 83. The original drawing was published in the first number of *The Studio*, April 1893.

¹² John McGahern, *Memoir*, 10.

¹³ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 205.

immortalised in art by Oscar Wilde and given physical characteristics (such as long curly hair) by Aubrey Beardsley.¹⁴

Wilde's personal history has certain similarities with McGahern's which may have been one of the reasons why McGahern was attracted to Wilde's work. Both Wilde and McGahern were martyrs at the altar of national hypocrisy: Wilde because he committed acts of 'gross indecency' with young boys and was sentenced to two years imprisonment for this crime. McGahern was sacked from his teaching position in St. John the Baptist Boys National School, Clontarf, Co. Dublin in 1965 by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid as a consequence of writing the so-called "dirty book" *The Dark* and also because he had gotten married outside the Catholic Church to a Finnish woman by the name of Anniki Laaksi. McGahern was offered the choice of resigning voluntarily or being officially removed from his position. McGahern was told that he would have no difficulty finding teaching work in England which he found extremely hypocritical since what he was effectively being told, as he saw it, was that it was "alright corrupting the English kids but it wasn't alright corrupting the kids out in Clontarf".¹⁵ Both the "Wilde Trials" and what became known as the "McGahern Case" were so abhorrent to the literary luminaries of their days that protests were proposed on behalf of both writers. In Wilde's case, W.B. Yeats collected letters of support from men of letters during Wilde's trial.¹⁶ In the matter of McGahern's dismissal, Samuel Beckett said that he would lead a

¹⁴ Another character who likes to link himself to biblical figures is Beckett's Estragon who says that all his life he has compared himself to Christ. See Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 52. The debt that *Waiting for Godot* owes to Wilde was argued for in the Introduction to this work.

¹⁵ Mike Murphy, *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*. Ed. by Clíodhna Ní Anulainn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), 145.

¹⁶ See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 441.

protest against McGahern's removal from his teaching post if he wished such a demonstration to be made. McGahern's reply was that he did not wish such efforts to be undertaken on his behalf. He said that he "did not think it worth protesting about".¹⁷ For both Wilde and McGahern, the ultimate result of both of their disgraces was exile. Wilde was forced to leave England for Paris and change his name to Sebastian Melmoth and McGahern went into self-imposed exile from Ireland immediately after his sacking. He worked "in London, as a labourer on building sites and as a substitute teacher".¹⁸ McGahern did not return to Ireland to live until 1974 when he came back with his second wife, Madeline. He lived out the rest of his life on a small farm in Co. Leitrim.

In many of McGahern's works, his characters seek out living spaces that afford them opportunities for self-exploration and liberation. At the end of the short story, "Eddie Mac", the title character seeks refuge from Ireland in the urban cities of England:

Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Glasgow—they were like cards spread out on a green table. His only regret was that he hadn't hit out for one of them years before. He would miss nothing. If he missed anything, it would probably be the tongued boards of the ceiling he had never managed to count. In those cities a man could stay lost forever and victory could still be found.¹⁹

¹⁷ Mike Murphy, *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, 145.

¹⁸ Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*, 251.

¹⁹ John McGahern, "Eddie Mac". *John McGahern: The Collected Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 294.

Eddie Mac's desire to be lost (while certainly referring to his need to hide from the relatives of the Irish girl he impregnated) indicates his view of urban England as a place where a person can discover hidden facets of his personality that had been previously hidden under the surface, a chance for identity experimentation which will result in a victory for individuality.

In "The Country Funeral", rural Ireland is the space of self-discovery for Philly who discovers in himself a buried love for the old customs and traditions of the country that he had exiled himself from for many years when he attends the country funeral of his uncle Peter: "I [Philly] thank god I was back [for the funeral]. The church was packed for the removal. Every neighbour around was at Killeelan... They honour the dead. That's what they do. People still mean something down there. They showed the respect they had for Peter".²⁰ Wilde's two "Bunburyists", Jack and Algy, both fulfil their need for identity enhancement by changing their usual living environments: Jack (like Eddie Mac) travels to town and adopts the persona of Ernest in order that he might fulfil his more extravagant impulses and Algy (like Philly) travels to the country and adopts the guise of Bunbury. Although McGahern's works do not use the more absurdist and farcical elements of Wilde's play (such as the changing of a character's name when he goes Bunburying), McGahern does echo Wilde's linking of self-exploration with

²⁰ John McGahern, "The Country Funeral". *John McGahern: The Collected Stories*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 404.

holidaymaking. Their characters expand on their personalities by changing their environments.²¹

McGahern does use a direct quotation from Wilde in a review he wrote of a biography of J.R. Ackerley by Peter Parker:

While [Ackerley] might acknowledge with Wilde that truth is rarely pure and never simple, he could hardly do so with his heart. This obsessiveness alarmed and saddened his friends. When you go down a mineshaft, Forster counselled, enjoy the lumps of coal, don't look for gold. Late in life Ackerley took up Rights of Animals with the same obsessiveness.²²

This direct usage of Wilde by McGahern demonstrates that Wilde did exert an artistic influence over McGahern's writing. The full quotation that McGahern made partial usage of in the above passage is verbalized by Algy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility" (*Earnest*, CCW, 362). By referencing this Wildean line, McGahern is, I would argue, giving a very good summation of the philosophy that he applied to his literary craft. McGahern's works very often deconstruct ideas that are supposedly simple and true such as notions gender binaries, essentialist conceptions of nationhood and right and wrong (as this chapter shall endeavour to

²¹ The idea of place playing an important role in the determining of people's behaviour and sense of self shall be a key point of discussion in relation to both *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* later on in this chapter.

²² John McGahern, "The Man Who Fell in Love With His Dog" (Review of *Ackerley: A Life of J.R. Ackerley* by Peter Parker), *The Irish Times*, 23 September 1989, Weekend, 8.

demonstrate). McGahern seems to share Wilde's belief that modern literature must rebel against simplistic notions of "truth" and seek to depict life in complex and nuanced terms. As a result of his subscription to this philosophy, McGahern has been capable of making a very worthwhile contribution to modern literature.

This chapter shall conduct a close analysis of the Wildean elements in John McGahern's final two novels: *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. In the case of *Amongst Women*, this chapter shall argue for the status of the women in the novel as being akin to the female dandy Lady Bracknell in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. With their utilisation of social codes and manners, Lady Bracknell and the Moran women essentially master the society to which they belong while at the same time also seeming to be mastered by it.²³ These women essentially remake their worlds into a more perfect and inclusive place for them to live and this gives them an affinity, not just with the Wildean dandies, but with the Wildean artists who never allow their art to conform to society but rather insist that society conforms to their art. I shall contrast the very modern and subversive Moran women with the character of Michael Moran who is depicted as a tragic dandy because the role that he persists in playing, that of the die-hard republican martyr, has become outmoded with the onset of Irish Independence. His refusal to adapt himself to the world around him makes his wife's and daughters' repeated assertion that "he'll not change" (AW, 131) seem almost like a tragic lament.²⁴

²³ A good volume of stories that depict the sexually transgressive female dandy is the collection *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siecle*, Ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1993). Showalter's Introduction provides a good historical analysis of the emergence of this figure

²⁴ Declan Kiberd has argued for Moran as a tragic hero because he is an epic figure who is trapped in the more banal world of the novel. See Declan Kiberd's "Amongst Women". *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements*. Ed. by Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 2006.

In the analysis of *That That They May Face the Rising Sun*, an affinity between the world that McGahern's final prose work has created and the one that exists in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* shall be argued for. In both living spaces, performance and affectation take precedence over the natural, and the external authorities of church and state are denied the power that they exert in the world that exists externally to these texts. By the end of this chapter, I hope to have demonstrated a strong Wildean influence on the author that Declan Kiberd referred to, prior to McGahern's death, as "the foremost writer in English now in Ireland".²⁵ While McGahern very often does no more than echo Wilde, he was such an important part of the cultural and literary context that existed in Ireland during McGahern's life that it is entirely reasonable to argue that McGahern was influenced by Wilde's artistic legacy.

Amongst Women

The critic Rodney Shewan, in his book *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, has observed that "dandyism exists in an ambivalent relationship with convention, playing with the rules while apparently respecting them".²⁶ It is this definition of the dandy that I propose to examine in relation to the female characters in *Amongst Women*.²⁷ Firstly, I am going to examine its relevance to the Wildean character that I believe to be the most perfect incarnation of the liberated female dandy in the plays of Oscar Wilde, Lady Bracknell

²⁵ Declan Kiberd and Eamon Maher, "John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World". *Doctrine and Life* 52.2 (February 2002), 82.

²⁶ Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, 150.

²⁷ For a full examination of the numerous forms that the figure of the dandy can take, see Elisa Glick's essay "The Dialectics of Dandyism". *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001), 129-163.

and, by so doing, I hope to establish a Wildean element in McGahern's *Amongst Women*. Lady Bracknell has been perceived by many critics as being the personification of a repressive and dictatorial Victorian society. Neil Sammells's assessment of Lady Bracknell in his book, *Wilde Style*, epitomises the majority view with regards to her character: "Her [Lady Bracknell's] remarks on education and democracy, her prophetic warnings about acts of violence in Grosvenor Square, all betoken a deep-seated conservatism, an institutionally enforced style of normativity".²⁸ It is certainly the case that Lady Bracknell does present herself as the champion of the normative standards of her age in lines such as: "Never speak disrespectfully of society...Only people who can't get into it do that" (*Earnest*, CCW, 409). I would argue however, that by virtue of the fact that she is a woman and therefore considered to be a second class citizen in that society, her championing of its social codes is itself an act of transgression. As Jarlath Killeen has argued, Lady Bracknell is presenting herself "as the protector of society but fashions it after her own image".²⁹

That Lady Bracknell is performing the dandy's trick of subverting the societal norms that she seems to be conforming to is explicitly stated when she tells Jack that she could easily alter both the fashion and the side of the street that he was living on if such a course of action were necessary (*Earnest*, CCW, 369). Lady Bracknell also embodies what Rodney Shewan has referred to as: "that androgynous blend of personality inherent at the heart of the dandy".³⁰ This androgyny is to be found in her dominating and manful relationship with her husband, Lord Bracknell, a character that is never seen throughout

²⁸ Neil Sammells, *Wilde Style* (Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), 110.

²⁹ Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 150.

³⁰ Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, 185.

the entire course of the play. The references that Lady Bracknell makes to her husband illustrate her total domination and feminisation of him. One such example concerns her wilful concealment of information from him concerning the whereabouts of their daughter Gwendolen:

Her unhappy father is, I am glad to say, under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the University Extension scheme on the influence of a permanent income on thought. I do not propose to undeceive him. Indeed I have never undeceived him on any question. I would consider it wrong. (*Earnest*, CCW, 407).

This quotation exemplifies the fact that it is Lady Bracknell who is the true power-broker in that marriage and ratifies her credentials as a manly woman.

The manner, in which the marriage between Lady and Lord Bracknell came about, while not actually depicted in the play, is hinted at by Lady Bracknell as having been the result of her machinations and her subversion of social norms. Despite insisting that she is not in favour of mercenary marriages, Lady Bracknell goes on to say: “When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind but I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way” (*Earnest*, CCW, 409). This statement indicates that Lady Bracknell did the extremely unladylike thing of pursuing her intended husband instead of demurely allowing herself to be pursued. Thus we see that Lady Bracknell, far from being purely a conservative defender of a restrictive society, is in fact a dandy subversive par-excellence

who expertly controls and manipulates societal codes from a secure position inside that society. It is the transgressive qualities of the dandy, as personified by Lady Bracknell, which I propose to examine in the characters of Rose Moran and her step-daughters in McGahern's *Amongst Women*. While this chapter certainly does not wish to imply that Rose is a virtual replica of the far more exaggerated figure of Lady Bracknell who is memorably described as "a monster without being a myth" (*Earnest*, CCW, 370) it will highlight the subtle similarities between the two characters.

The character of Rose Moran is established very early on in the novel as being a modern day incarnation of the Wildean dandy in the following excellent summation of her psyche:

Her true instinct was always to work behind the usual social frameworks: family, connections, position conventions, those established forms that can be used like weapons when they are mastered. Behind them she could work with a charm and singleness of attention that became so smooth as to be almost chilling (AW, 24).³¹

While the character of Michael Moran may be the domineering individual of this novel, it is Rose who manipulates and orchestrates many of the events and characters that exist in

³¹ McGahern's interest in how manners and various other social codes can be used as weapons is evident from the admiration he has expressed for the Jean Renoir film, *La Règle de Jeu (the Rules of the Game)*, which chronicles the gamesmanship engaged in by various members of the French aristocracy during a weekend in the country. The rules being referred to in the title are those of the game of class and social etiquette. See John McGahern, "Whatever you say, say nothing". *The Irish Times*, 30. 12.1999, 27.

the world of Great Meadow (the Moran household).³² On the surface, Rose might appear as Moran's slave and drudge-and certainly that is the impression that one would get of her character in the RTE dramatisation of *Amongst Women*. The reality is, however, that she is the person who wields the balance of power in the house that she marries into. As Lori Rogers has written: "Rose desires access to law which is the household in Ireland; more importantly, she desires to wield that law, rather than just receive it.... [B]y taking part in patriarchy as a woman, Rose cannot help subverting [its structures]."³³ The relationship between Moran and Rose is very similar to the one that existed between the author's father and his second wife, who filled the role of John McGahern's stepmother and is described by McGahern in his *Memoir* as being both his father's "slave and master".³⁴

From the beginning of their courtship together, Rose is the one who manipulates Moran into pursuing her, while still refusing to go outside the codes of convention that govern her society by being too obviously desirous of him. When Moran refused to make any overt advances towards her, Rose withdrew from him. This withdrawal forced Moran to pursue her, something that the conventions of the time dictated that a man should do in a courtship. As Antoinette Quinn has stated: "[Rose] mounts a shrewd tactical campaign designed to flush his [Moran's] interest out into the open".³⁵ In the matter of setting a date for the wedding, it is Rose who skilfully gets Moran to agree a time and place for the

³² For another good feminist reading of *Amongst Women*, see Siobhan Holland, "'Hel-lo... Hel-lo... Hel-lo': The Uncertain Voice of Patriarchy in John McGahern's Fictions of the War of Independence". *Postcolonial Ireland* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2003), 87-100.

³³ Lori Rogers, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 81.

³⁴ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 5.

³⁵ Antoinette Quinn, "A Prayer for My Daughter: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*". *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991), Special Issue on McGahern, 84.

nuptials despite his reluctance to do so. It is in fact fair to say that Moran “exercises very little control in the manner of his marriage”.³⁶ By coaxing him and using all the social charm that is at her disposal, Rose manages to finally have the wedding that she desired. As the novel makes clear: “[Rose] set the time and was too happy to notice that he [Moran] was more like a man listening to a door close than one going towards his joy” (AW, 37). Rose and Lady Bracknell are thus united by the fact that they both played proactive roles in securing themselves a husband. Marriage for them was something that they made happen as opposed to something that happened to them.

Once Rose and Moran are married, Rose plays the role of the typical, subservient wife to perfection. She looks after his children and keeps his house in pristine condition. In short, she does everything that society and convention require of a wife. Lori Rogers, in her book *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan*, has defined women’s place in Irish society as follows:

The woman’s only valid role in a traditional Roman Catholic society was Mother, and Ireland was... to be a Roman Catholic nation. Irish leaders clung to Ireland’s Catholic heritage as proof of Ireland’s status as the first civilized western people...and therefore they departed from the usual policy of post-colonial nations which affirmed and harkened back to ancient, pre-colonial matriarchy or equality for women.³⁷

³⁶ Rudiger Imhof, *The Modern Irish Novel: Irish Writers Since 1945* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 2002), 232.

³⁷ Quoted in Grace Tighe Ledwidge, “Death in Marriage: The Tragedy of Elizabeth Regan in *The Barracks*”. *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005), Special Issue on McGahern, 91. Lori Rogers’s arguments concerning the rebellious potential of the Moran women’s seeming passivity has many

At certain moments, however, Rose is required to use her knowledge of the nuances of human contact for her own self-preservation. When Moran verbally abuses her for tidying the house by telling her: “There’s no need for you to go turning the whole place upside down. We managed well enough before you ever came into the place” (AW, 69), Rose withdraws to her room in an extremely theatrical manner that is comparable to the dandy’s love of affectation and the performance. She tells Moran that she will “have to go away from here” (AW, 71). This statement appears to be Rose passively submitting to her husband’s wishes since he seems unhappy with her presence in the house. The truth is that it is a shrewd tactical move that is designed to offer an ultimatum to Moran in the guise of a dutiful wife submitting to the will of her husband. That Rose is playing a game of tactics is emphasised in this description of her announcement of her intended departure: “she spoke with the quietness and desperate authority of someone who discovered they could give up no more ground and live” (AW, 71). This description makes clear the fact that, for Rose, social interaction is a battleground.

Moran’s response to Rose indicates her power to reduce him to the position of supplication: “I never meant anything like that. The whole world knows that the house was never run right until you came. A blind man can tell that the children think the world of you” (AW, 71). While there is no formal reconciliation between the two, Moran has been out-manoeuvred by his socially more experienced wife who has used the pose of the passive wife to gain the upper-hand in their gender battle. As Robert F. Garratt has

similarities with mine. However, the concept of the dandy that is the primary focus of this chapter is not a feature of her work which is a point of demarcation between us.

observed: Rose is “a character who can work around the role given to mid-century Irish women”.³⁸ After this altercation, “Rose’s place in the house could never be attacked or threatened again” (AW. 73). It is worth noting that Rose’s tactic of passive resistance is a perfect example of the Wildean observation that “[t]he tyranny of the weak over the strong...is the only tyranny that lasts” (*Woman*, CCW, 494).

Rose’s position as mistress of the house is consolidated when she begins to “clean and paint the house room by room” (AW, 48-49). This need to create for herself a beautiful house is evidence of how Rose is a very Wildean figure because Wilde had championed very emphatically the importance of the decorative arts in his essay “The House Beautiful”. Whether consciously or otherwise, Rose is complying with the concluding paragraph of that essay:

And so let it be for you to create an art that is made with the hands of the people, for the joy of the people too, an art that will be a democratic art, entering into the houses of the people, making beautiful the simplest vessels they contain, for there is nothing in common life too mean, in common things too trivial, to be ennobled by your touch, nothing in life that art cannot raise and sanctify (“Beautiful”, CCW, 925).

³⁸ Robert F. Garrat, “John McGahern’s *Amongst Women*: Representation, Memory and Trauma”. *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005), Special Issue on McGahern, 126.

When Moran supplicates himself before Rose by telling her that the house was never as well run before she came to be mistress, he is inadvertently agreeing with the opening passage of “The House Beautiful”:

The decorative arts have flourished most when the position of women was highly honoured, when women occupied that place on the social scale that they should not...It has been from the desire of women to beautify their households that decorative arts has always received its impulse and encouragement (“Beautiful”, CCW, 913).

Although the Moran household had been kept in order by Moran’s daughters since he became a widow, they did not have the same elevated status in the household that Rose occupied. With Rose’s attainment of a position of authority in household, the home flourished in terms of both its aesthetic qualities and because of a certain alleviation of the oppressive mood that existed inside it because of Moran’s intimidating presence.

Rose’s presence in the house also has an extremely liberating effect on Moran’s three daughters, Maggie, Mona and Sheila. As James Whyte has written: “In *Amongst Women*, Rose uses her perfect mastery of social niceties to convey a sense of their own individuality to each of the Moran children”.³⁹ That Rose has achieved something of a “dandification” of Moran’s children is implicitly stated in the following passage:

³⁹ James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*. Lewiston (N.Y.; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 181.

Rose and the girls smiled as the tea and the plates circled around him [Moran]. They were already conspirators. They were mastered and yet they were controlling together what they were mastered by (AW, 46).

This description of the Moran females being both mastered and masterful bears striking similarities with Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly's observation concerning one of the traits of dandy: "[The Dandy]...while still respecting the conventionalities, plays with them...dominates and is dominated by them in turn".⁴⁰ Now, like all good practitioners of dandyism, the Moran girls will use the rules of society as a mask to disguise their rebellious natures and attempt to find what freedoms they can within the strictures that are placed on them. Denis Sampson, while never actually bringing up the subject of the dandy, offers a similar evaluation of Rose's influence on the Moran girls: [Rose] teaches [the Moran girls] that diplomacy and tact is another source of power".⁴¹

I would argue that the daughter that most successfully embodies the dandy's spirit of "conformist rebellion" is the youngest, Sheila. The earliest description of this daughter is that she is "too self centred and bright ever to challenge authority on poor ground" (AW, 8). These character traits of cunning and respecting authority make Sheila the ideal dandy figure. Sheila's capacity for conformist rebellion is clearly demonstrated very early on in the novel when she "pretended to be sick in order to escape the tension of [Monaghan] Day" (AW, 8). On this day her father was always at his most unpredictable and rather than be subjected to his mercurial and possibly violent moods, Sheila absented herself

⁴⁰ Quoted in Christopher Lane, "The Drama of the Imposter: Dandyism and Its Double." *Cultural Critique* 28 (Autumn 1994), 29.

⁴¹ Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*, 233.

from the preparation of the evening meal by hiding behind the socially acceptable excuse of illness.

The incident in which Sheila first shows her perfect mastery of social codes occurs when she is offered a scholarship to go to University and possibly study medicine. This offer is met with vehement resistance from Moran -who was a veteran of the Irish War of Independence- since: “It was the priest and the doctor and not the guerrilla fighters who had emerged as the bigwigs in the country that Moran had fought for. For his own daughter to lay claim to such a position was an intolerable affront” (AW, 88). In the face of this opposition, Sheila turns down the scholarship and takes the more secure path of a job in the civil service. When he is certain that Sheila is securely set towards the civil service” (AW, 89), Moran then begins to offer some financial support in respect of Sheila going to University. Sheila, true to form as a social games-woman, refuses these offers. “She knew the offers would disappear again the very moment she tried to take them up” (AW, 89). By giving ground to her father, Sheila has ensured that her place in the family would be secure and that she can return home for sustenance whenever she wishes. Having her home available to her as a place of asylum is more important to Sheila than academic achievement so she cedes ground in order that her place in Great Meadow may be secure.

As she grows older and becomes a wife, Sheila dutifully returns home frequently but begins to act out her rebellion in this familial environment in a more overt fashion. The haymaking scene near the novel’s close is where Sheila’s subversion of the social sphere

in which she has immersed herself is made the most evident. Instead of remaining with her family out in the fields, Sheila goes back into the house halfway through the day with her husband Sean. By so-doing, Sheila is remaining within the family circle while at the same time subverting the rituals and customs that Moran has made inviolate over the years. During this section of the work, John McGahern gives his readers an insight into Sheila's psyche and, in so doing, provides another of the book's descriptions of the dandy's mindset:

She [Sheila] would belong to the family but not on any terms. She knew instinctively that she could not live without it: she would need it, she would use it, but she would not be used *by* it [my italics] except in the way she wanted (AW, 167).

In that eloquent and skilfully written prose passage, McGahern has solidified Sheila's status as a dandy: someone who is such a skilful performer of the rules of society that they can bend those rules to suit their own purposes.

While she exhibits all the outward traits of femininity, in that she is a devoted daughter, mother and wife, Sheila also has externalised that element of androgyny that Rodney Shewan saw as being essential to the dandy's make-up and which was irrefutably present in the Wilde's most famous dandy, Lady Bracknell. This androgyny is exhibited by Sheila when she manfully confronts Moran about his hostility towards her husband: "I see you are cutting your visitors down to size nowadays as well" (AW, 58).

The manly side of Sheila is acknowledged by her father as being present when he tells Sheila to “go and trim that poor husband of yours if you want something to trim. I’d say you’re the *man* [my italics] for the job alright” (AW, 58).

That their country home in Great Meadow is considered almost a utopian space by the Moran girls is evidenced by the fact that they return to it with such eager regularity. As we are told in one of the earliest passages in the work:

On the tides of Dublin or London they [the Moran girls] were hardly more than specks of froth but together they were the aristocratic Morans of Great Meadow, a completed world, Moran’s daughters (AW, 2).

While the role of Moran’s daughters seems to be a repressive one, the girls found in it a means of creating freedom and individuality for themselves. I would argue that this obsessive returning to the country has many similarities with the character of Algy in *The Importance of Being Earnest* who regularly travels down to his country house in order that he might gain a sense of his individuality by playing the part of his alter ego, Bunbury. In both Wilde’s play and McGahern’s novel, the country is portrayed as a site of performance and liberation, an idea that is developed further in McGahern’s next work, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, (which will be discussed later on in this chapter).⁴²

⁴² For a further discussion of the importance of the rural world in McGahern’s fiction, see Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003).

That the Moran girls shift from one way of behaving to another depending on the landscape that they are inhabiting is demonstrated when the eldest daughter, Maggie, takes her English, “teddy boy” fiancé, Mark, home with her to meet her father. Mark notices a change in Maggie from the moment that they enter her family home:

What had first impressed him [Mark] most about Maggie was her air of separateness and superiority...In this house it disappeared as if it had never existed. She who had never appeared to him less than confident was nervous, cautious, careful in every word and movement (*AW*, 35).

What Mark mistakes for conformity, I would argue is in fact Maggie’s guile and dandyish cunning. She wishes her marriage with Mark to be blessed by her father and is carefully manoeuvring the situation to allow this to happen. Maggie knows that the conventions of the time dictate that her father’s consent must be obtained if the marital union is to be achieved without causing a rift in the family. For this reason, Maggie conceals from Moran the fact that they are engaged already, so he can be given the opportunity to say “yes” or “no” to the match. By so-doing, Maggie is sticking to the letter of convention but is subverting the spirit of it. Maggie takes great strength from the fact that she is one of the “aristocratic Morans” and wishes to ensure that this identity is not endangered. For this reason, she is willing to play to perfection the role of the dutiful daughter. This performance achieves the desired result because Moran does give his approval to their marriage, albeit grudgingly. When they leave Great Meadow, Maggie once again becomes the woman that Mark fell in love with and they go to the bar on the

train for a drink, something that Maggie had not wished to do on the journey down. This rapid change of character illustrates Maggie's mastery of various identity roles that Wilde's Algy demonstrated in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The fact that his wife and daughters have this subversive potential is keenly felt by Moran and his intimidation by their feminine wiles is made clear in the first sentence of the book: "As he weakened, Moran become afraid of his daughters" (AW, 1). By the end of his life, Moran is completely in the power of the women of his house, in much the same manner as Lord Bracknell was completely in the power of his wife, Lady Bracknell, in Wilde's great play. Rose and the daughters believe that their feminine power will be enough to restore Moran back to health. They are completely convinced that "since they had the power of birth there was no reason why they couldn't will this life free of death" (AW, 178). Faced with this firm insistence that he get well again, "for the first time in his life Moran began to fear them" (AW, 178). The fear that Moran feels for the women in his life is a recognition that he "may have been ostensibly in control as far as the life of his family was concerned, but surreptitiously he has, for the greater part, been manipulated by his wife and his children".⁴³

As Moran is lying on his death bed and his daughters are saying the Rosary over him, Moran realizes that the women in his life have finally usurped him, since it is their female voices that are intoning the Rosary over his dying body- a ritual that his masculine voice had led his family in for the majority of his life. This scene indicates the women's mastery of the important conventions of the society of which they were a part: A society

⁴³ Rudiger Imhof, *The Modern Irish Novel: Irish Writers Since 1945*, 232.

that, as John McGahern observed: “had become a theocracy in all but name”.⁴⁴ Moments before Moran dies, he utters his last words which are an attempt to silence this now dominant female voice: “Shut up” (AW, 80). McGahern, like Wilde, was always very responsive to the aesthetic elements of the Catholic Church even while he disliked the repressive ethos that emanated from its doctrine. McGahern gave voice to the importance of Catholicism in his life in an interview with Mike Murphy when he said that “[t]he Church was my very first book and it remains my most important.”⁴⁵

With Moran’s death, the androgyny that is one of the hallmarks of the dandy and has been a character trait of the Moran women throughout *Amongst Women*, is explicitly attributed to them: “it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy” (AW, 183). Antoinette Quinn has argued that the ending of *Amongst Women* offers no feminist liberation but merely a passing on of a regressive, militaristic masculinity onto the women of modern Ireland. She writes that, with the death of the former I.R.A fighter Moran: “the legacy of the War of Independence, a triumphalist, masculinist ethic of dominance, has been transmitted to the next generation”.⁴⁶ It is my contention that such a reading must by necessity ignore the passages that I have quoted in the preceding pages concerning the Moran women using societal conventions but not being used by them and as a result controlling that which they are meant to be mastered by. These lines, I believe, are important when considering the ending of the novel. What they seem to suggest is that Rose, Maggie, Sheila and Mona will use their mastery of masculinist dogma and turn

⁴⁴ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 210.

⁴⁵ Mike Murphy, *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, 140.

⁴⁶ Antoinette Quinn, “A Prayer for My Daughter: Patriarchy in *Amongst Women*”, 90.

it into what Lori Rogers has called a “partially feminised authority”.⁴⁷ As a result, they will create a less essentialist and more androgynous psyche. That such an androgyny is already emerging in Ireland is implicitly stated in the novels concluding paragraph:

Will you look at the men. They’re more like a crowd of women’ Sheila said, remarking on the slow frivolity of their pace. ‘The way Michael, the skit, is getting Sean and Mark to laugh you’d think they were coming home from a dance” (AW, 184).

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algy laments what he perceives as the incapability of men and women to embrace the “other” in their natures: “All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his” (*Earnest*; CCW, 371). At the conclusion of *Amongst Women*, the Moran daughters have successfully avoided this tragic fate by becoming (at least in part) their *father* as opposed to their mother. This embracing of androgyny is what enables them to attain a certain degree of mastery over a world that has always attempted to master them. It is entirely by fortuitous coincidence that the year that *Amongst Women* was published was 1990: the year that Mary Robinson became the first female president of Ireland, thus signifying a shift away from an essentially male-dominated Ireland and a move towards a more feminine-influenced society of the kind that is, I would contend, prophesised at the conclusion of John McGahern’s *Amongst Women*.

⁴⁷ Lori Rogers, *Feminine Nation: Performance, Gender and Resistance in the Works of John McGahern and Neil Jordan*, 87.

In contrast to the liberated female dandies that exist around him, Moran can be seen as a tragic dandy in the sense that the role he is destined to live out for the majority of his life, that of a Republican hero-martyr, became obsolete after the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922: A state that Moran had fought for but was eventually to feel disenfranchised by once it was created. Thus, Moran can be seen as a dandy according to Charles Baudelaire's definition of this figure: "a Hercules with no work".⁴⁸ In the aftermath of the War of Independence, Moran retreated into the enclosed world of his house and effectively established a Republic in microcosm, of which he was the sole wielder of authority. This retreat into his own "completed world" (AW, 2), only serves to highlight Moran's failure to create a role for himself in the new Ireland that he was instrumental in founding. As Siobhan Holland has stated: "[Moran's] decision to focus on the home as the scene for his enactment of patriarchal authority is effectively a retrenchment".⁴⁹ Denis Sampson has correctly identified the tragic status of Michael Moran and, indeed, all the father figures in McGahern's fictions, by referring to them collectively as "the Lear of Oakport, the Cronos of Cootehall".⁵⁰

In his discussion of the works of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin outlines Baudelaire's vision of the dandy that has great similarities with the character of Michael

⁴⁸ Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*. Trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso), 1983, 96.

⁴⁹ Siobhan Holland, "'Hel-lo... Hel-lo... Hel-lo': The Uncertain Voice of Patriarchy in John McGahern's Fictions of the War of Independence", 92.

⁵⁰ Denis Sampson, *Outstaring Nature's Eye: The Fiction of John McGahern*, 11. In an article written to commemorate Easter 1916, McGahern talks about his disappointment concerning the independent Irish Free State and its betrayal of the heroes and codes that lead to its foundation. McGahern says that the spirit of the Proclamation of Independence was subverted by the Free State that grew out of that assertion in the General Post Office. See McGahern's "From a Glorious Dream to Wink and Nod" (*The Irish Times*, Wednesday April 3, 1991), 9.

Moran: “To Baudelaire the dandy appeared to be the descendent of great ancestors. For him dandyism was ‘the last shimmer of the heroic in times of decadence’.⁵¹ This idea of the dandy as the last vestige of heroism in an un-heroic age encapsulates Moran’s character in the sense that he is attempting to act out heroism on a stage that no longer has any need for such a figure.⁵² He has essentially become anachronistic to the Free State that he helped create. It is very probable that it was in response to the emergence of this incarnation of the dandy that led Oscar Wilde to write: “all the world is a stage, but the play is badly cast” (*Savile, CCW*, 165).⁵³ However, unlike Baudelaire and McGahern, Wilde never treated the dandy as a tragic figure in any of his works so the character of Michael Moran is a contrasting figure to the Wildean dandies as well as the female characters in *Amongst Women*.⁵⁴

In his *Memoir*, John McGahern gives a description of his father (one of the sources for the character of Moran) that also serves as a very good encapsulation of Moran:

He was a man who acted out his life in parts and who lived his life, as far as it was possible, in roles...I suspected that his happiest role was in the I.R.A, where

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, 96.

⁵² One of the sources for the character of Moran may have been the Irish Republican fighter Ernie O’Malley, who left Ireland after independence to fight in the Mexican civil war because he could not adjust to life as a civilian. McGahern had a great admiration for O’Malley’s autobiography, *On Another Man’s Wound*. See McGahern’s “In Pursuit of a Single Flame” (review of *The Singing Flame*, by Ernie O’Malley), *The Irish Times*, 17 February 1996, Weekend, 8.

⁵³ This quote has already been used in the Introduction to this thesis but it was in relation to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

⁵⁴ Rodney Shewan argues very passionately for Wilde’s dandies as being positive figures who almost act as modern day beacons of hope. See Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*.

his propensity for violence was tempered by cold calculation and a keen sense of self-preservation”.⁵⁵

Moran's persistence with his role as army commander is illustrated in the early pages of the novel when he refers to his children as “the troops” (AW, 3), a description that is repeated *ad-infinitum* throughout the work. Within the first ten pages of *Amongst Women*, McGahern gives his readers a concrete example of Moran's desperate need for a stage upon which to enact his militaristic role. When the Moran women are having breakfast, they are startled by the sound of a gunshot. Upon investigation, they discovered Moran “standing at the open window in his pyjamas, the shotgun in his hand, staring out at the front field where the black splash of a jackdaw lay on the white ground beneath the ash tree”(AW, 7). The only explanation that Moran was willing to offer for shooting at the bird was: “That bloody bird has been annoying me for days” (AW, 7). This incident is a perfect metaphor for Moran's need to continue playing the role of the soldier in an age in which such a role is redundant. The sheer ludicrousness of such a role in the context that it is being enacted is exemplified by the picture of Moran in his dressing gown shooting out the window at a bird as opposed to the days of his youth when he would have been standing at a window in his trench coat shooting at British soldiers. One description of the annual haymaking in Great Meadow indicates how every living space that Moran inhabits is a potential stage for him to act out his identity as a trained killer:

As Rose and the girls were crossing the swards to the tractor they almost stumbled over a hen pheasant sitting on her nest...The legs had been cut from under her

⁵⁵ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 226.

while she sat. Her eyes were shining and alive, a taut stillness over her neck and body, petrified in her instinct (AW, 159).

When Moran realizes that he has mutilated this hen with his tractor, his response indicates the cold-heartedness of a person for whom death is a regular and almost banal occurrence: “You can’t see them [the hens] in the grass. Anyhow the hares escaped’ (AW, 159).

Moran’s attempts at social interaction are described in terms that resemble a military campaign and show his inability to adapt to domestic civilian life. An example of this occurs when Rose is tidying up the house and Moran remonstrates with her “as quietly as if he were taking rifle aim” (AW, 69). Social interaction for Moran can only be understood as a game of combat and he takes part in it as though he was still a member of a Flying Column and fighting a guerrilla war against the British for the liberation of Ireland. Moran himself admits that he is not adept at relating when he declares: “The closest I ever got to any man was when I had him in the sights of my rifle and I never missed” (AW, 7). That statement illustrates, once again, how incapable Moran is of adapting gracefully to the rules of civilian life in peace-time.

The world of Great Meadow, as it is presented in *Amongst Women*, has many affinities with the Anglo-Irish Big Houses that are depicted in such novels as Somerville and Ross’s *The Real Charlotte* and Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*, a work which Declan Kiberd has described as “one of the very few works of literature to consider that

the dandy is a fit subject for tragedy”.⁵⁶ Like *Amongst Women*, these works depict people who are barricaded into enclosed worlds that are symbolised by houses that protect the inhabitants from the constant changes that are going on in the society outside their walls. Eamonn Hughes has already noted similarities between *Amongst Women* and the Big House novel:

[The Big House novel documents the] passing the away of a dominant social order imaged in a patriarchal figure...and the emerging power of the feminine principle, the sense that this gender reversal has a progressive aspect which also unsettles any secure inheritance through the male line.⁵⁷

The Anglo-Irish in turn of the century Ireland, as Declan Kiberd has described them, share many affinities with Moran and his Republic of Great Meadow: “It [Anglo-Irish society] enjoyed power without taking responsibility for the wider countryside...instead, it simply pulled up the drawbridge”.⁵⁸ The character of Lois in Bowen’s *Last September*, suffers from the same problem that has plagued Moran ever since his demobilisation from the I.R.A. Like Moran, in Lois’s life: “there was no occasion for courage, which like an unused muscle slackened and slept”. Both Lois and Moran are refugees from another age which modernity has made passé. Both characters were, to quote Yeats:

⁵⁶ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage), 1995, 373.

⁵⁷ Eamonn Hughes, “‘All That Surrounds Our Life’: Time, Sex and Death in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*”. *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005), Special Issue on McGahern, 152. Belinda McKeon also provides an analysis of the importance of the protestant big house in McGahern’s work. See Belinda McKeon, “‘Robins Feeding With the Sparrows’: The Protestant ‘Big House’ in the Fiction of John McGahern”. *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005), Special Issue on McGahern, 72-89.

⁵⁸ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 365.

“born into that ancient sect/But thrown upon this filthy modern tide”.⁵⁹ Therefore, it can be considered ironic that it was Moran and his Republican brothers who signed the death warrant for the ascendancy of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland and were then themselves to suffer the same fate of displacement. It is possible that it is Moran’s realization of the similarities between his plight and that of the Anglo-Irish Protestant class that lead him to identify “much more with this beleaguered class than his Catholic neighbours” (AW, 163).

John McGahern would have been keenly aware of, and sympathetic towards, the fate of the Protestant Anglo-Irish since it was as a result of contact with a local family of Protestants (the Moroneys) when he was a boy that he was to gain his first access to books. The Moroneys had a very extensive library and McGahern was allowed free and uninhibited access to its contents. In an interview that Mike Murphy conducted with John McGahern in 2000, McGahern talked humorously about the seeming cliché of an Irish Catholic writer being introduced to literature by a Protestant family:

I saw that a young Catholic North of Ireland writer said recently that if he saw another reference to an Irish writer getting his reading material in a Protestant house, he’d puke. Should I say that I got them from a Jewish house”.⁶⁰

Like the dwellers of the Anglo-Irish Big Houses, Moran rarely allows the outside to intrude on his self-contained haven. The only contact that Moran allowed himself with

⁵⁹ William Butler Yeats, “The Statues”. *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 215.

⁶⁰ Mike Murphy, *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*, 143.

the outside world was the annual visits from his old I.R.A. comrade, John McQuaid, who visited him every Monaghan Day: the cattle market that took place on the last Thursday in February. The primary reason for Moran allowing these yearly visits, I would argue, is that they gave him an opportunity to relive the days when his heroic pose was a perfect fit for the times in which he lived: the times when the Hercules that was Moran actually had some work. As Moran freely admitted:

For people like McQuaid and myself the war was the best part of our lives. Things were never so simple or clear again. I think we never rightly got the hang of it afterwards (AW, 6).

When McQuaid comes to visit, Moran and he repeatedly lapse into reminiscing about their escapades during the War of Independence: such as their assassination of a British army general. McQuaid is also willing to pander to Moran's substantial ego by praising his role in their military operations with statements such as: "“You could plan. You worked it out from beginning to end [the general's assassination]. None of the rest of us had that kind of head”" (AW, 15) or “ ‘You had a great head on you the way you thought that plan through from beginning to end. You’ve been wasted ever since’" (AW, 15). Even this admittance of the outside world on Moran's part cannot go on indefinitely . Moran eventually comes to resent McQuaid's success at adapting to the role of an Irish civilian in peacetime and their friendship that had lasted for more than two decades is severed by McQuaid informing Moran that “some people just cannot bear to come in second” (AW, 22). Moran had lent McQuaid money to get him started as a cattle farmer

which lead to McQuaid becoming far more successful than his former Column commander. It is very possible that McGahern was influenced by the Archbishop John Charles McQuaid when he was naming Moran's former comrade in arms since, not only do they share the same name, but they both represent a society that neither McGahern nor Moran wanted to be a part of. The sexism of McQuaid, as evidenced by the cruel treatment of his wife, could be a veiled reference to the Catholic Church's archaic treatment of women at the time that this novel was set.

Moran's identity as a tragic dandy is compounded near the end of his life (although structurally it takes place at the beginning of the book) when he is granted a moment of recognition that his time spent as a republican rebel 'hero' was, in fact, not as heroic as he had originally believed. He communicates this moment of realization to his daughters when they return home to 'revive' Monaghan Day for him:

Don't let anybody fool you... [The war] was a bad business. We didn't shoot at women and children like the Tans but we were a bunch of killers...Don't let them pull wool over your eyes. The war was the cold, the wet, standing to your neck in a drain for a whole night...not knowing how you could manage the next step towards the end of the long march. That was the war: not when the band played and the bloody politician stepped forward to put flowers on the ground (AW, 5).

In this epiphanic moment, Moran acknowledges a truth concerning the modern hero. A truth that was correctly stated by Walter Benjamin when he wrote: "For the modern hero

is no hero; he *acts* [my italics] heroes. Heroic modernism turns out to be a tragedy in which the heroes' part is available".⁶¹ Considering the extremely critical and non-jingoistic stance that *Amongst Women* takes with regard to the I.R.A and the Irish War of Independence, it is almost impossible to comprehend how the English critic, A.N. Wilson, at the 1990 Booker prize ceremony, could claim that "the novel glorifies the I.R.A.". ⁶²

The description of Moran's funeral, allegorically demonstrates how outmoded his identity and the ideals that this identity represented had become:

All through the High Mass and the slow funeral a faded tricolour covered the coffin; and as the casket stood on the edge of the grave a little man in a brown felt hat, old and stiff enough to have fought with Fionn and Oisinn came out of the crowd. With deep respect he removed his hat before folding the worn flag and with it he stepped back into the crowd. There was no firing party (AW, 183).

The heroic Ireland that Moran had been a part of had faded into the past as the tricolour on his coffin was fading and, since the Ireland that he died in was no longer a martial country, he was not granted a gun salute.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, 97.

⁶² John McGahern, "The Solitary Reader". *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991), `Special Issue on McGahern, 23.

James Whyte has written that John McGahern's "mistake is to believe that culture and 'manners' can be separated from political power".⁶³ My belief, and what this chapter has been attempting to argue, is that *Amongst Women* is a novel in which John McGahern has shown that he was acutely aware of how powerful a mastery of the culture and manners of a society can be in terms of creating for oneself a position of dominance within that society. In that respect, culture and manners are indeed political weapons. John McGahern's own analysis of *Amongst Women* seems to concur with the argument that the novel is about the creation of a sphere of influence and power for women by using the tools that their world allows them:

If the novel suggests anything, it is how difficult it is for people, especially women who until recently had no real power at all in our society, to try to create a space to live and love in the shadow of violence. How they managed to do that in the novel becomes their uncertain triumph.⁶⁴

The women in *Amongst Women*, by embracing Wildean dandyism and subverting the social codes and manners that they seem to be imprisoned by, prove how potent a political weapon that manners can be. By using manners to subvert the stringent moral codes of their age, the Moran women are, in essence, adopting the Wildean maxim: "manners before morals" (*Windermere*, CCW, 457). Michael Moran, by refusing to adapt to the changing culture and values that govern Ireland's identity politics, denies himself any part in the political power of the new state that he helped to create. As a result, he

⁶³ James Whyte, *History, Myth and Ritual in the Fiction of John McGahern: Strategies of Transcendence*, 29.

⁶⁴ John McGahern, "The Solitary Reader", 23.

symbolises the necessity for developing an appreciation and mastery of the social codes and manners of society. Because Moran persistently refuses to actively engage with modernity, he ironically proves himself to be a very un-heroic figure because, as Benjamin has stated: “The hero is the true subject of modernism. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernism”.⁶⁵ The figures that are depicted as heroic in modern literature are those such as Leopold Bloom who does not reject the trappings of the new world of the twentieth century but rather embraces it and looks upon his surroundings with awe. Moran has tragically lost his status as hero because he refuses to engage with the new standards of heroism.

That They May Face the Rising Sun

Rodney Shewan’s memorable description of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* was that it is in essence “the dandy’s holiday... an idyllic trip to the land of doing what one likes’ where only reason and external authority are denied entry”.⁶⁶ In the discussion of John McGahern’s final novel, it shall be argued that the world in which *That They May Face the Rising Sun* exists shares the same playful and utopian qualities that are present in Wilde’s great play. As has already been referenced in this chapter, John McGahern once wrote of art as being “an attempt to create a world in which we can live...allowing us to see and celebrate even the totally intolerable”.⁶⁷ It is my contention that *That They May Face the Rising Sun* represents McGahern’s final realization of his

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: a lyric poet in the era of high capitalism*, 74.

⁶⁶ Rodney, Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, 187. This quotation was also used in the *Ulysses* chapter of this thesis.

⁶⁷ John McGahern, “The Image”, 13.

artistic ambition to create just such a world: a world that is at one remove from the pressures of the external authorities of church and state that had, in varying degrees, encroached upon his existence from a very early age. While McGahern's earlier works, such as *The Leavetaking* and *Amongst Women*, had offered their characters glimpses of utopian escapism, the society which existed all around them was ever present and never allowed itself to be forgotten. This is particularly true in the case of *The Leavetaking* in which the central character (a thinly veiled version of McGahern himself) is removed from his teaching post in Dublin because of his marriage, outside the Catholic Church, to an American woman. Although this character, whose name is Moran (a very common name in McGahern's works) has spent a great deal of this novel outside of Ireland and has found love in the process, realism dictated that he must eventually return and answer the call of the dogmatic country into which he had been born.⁶⁸ In contrast, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, when it does admit of the existence of some societal authority, whether it be that of church or state, either ignores it completely or subjects it to merciless mockery. It is arguable that such a literary strategy has important links with Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Terence Killeen has argued that *The Leavetaking*, because of its emphasis on exile and homecoming, echoes Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*. See Terence Killeen, "Versions of Exile: A Reading of *The Leavetaking*". *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991). Special Issue on McGahern, 69-78.

⁶⁹ Declan Kiberd has argued that Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* is an important textual presence in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. See Kiberd's "Fallen Nobility: The World of John McGahern" *Irish University Review* (Spring/Summer 2005) Special Issue on McGahern: 164-174. Since Kiberd has also contended that Wilde had was one of the writers that Synge engaged with during the writing of his play, it is feasible to claim that McGahern has been covertly influenced by Wilde through Synge or possibly vice versa. See Kiberd's "Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying". *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*. Ed. by Peter Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 276-294.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both the church and the class system of the state are subjected to belligerent satire in the person of Canon Chasuble. The emblematic example of this occurs in Chasuble's humorous speech concerning the content of his sermons:

My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion...I have preached it at confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days. The last time I delivered it was in the Cathedral, as a charity sermon on behalf of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders. The Bishop, who was present, was much struck by some of the analogies that I drew (*Earnest*, CCW, 381).

In that passage, Wilde is making the very cutting observation that the doctrines of the church and state are dependent upon archaic repetition and are devoid of any originality or capacity for renewal. It is also significant that a Bishop is present at the annual meeting of the Society for the Prevention of Discontent among the Upper Orders because it is implicitly linking the church with the oppressive class system of the state. This collusion of church and state in the policing of a country would no doubt have struck a chord with John McGahern since he was removed from his teaching position as a result of the demands of Archbishop Charles McQuaid and the political powers of Ireland refused to intervene to correct this injustice. McGahern also was given no support from the Irish National Teachers Organisation which was, in theory at all events, supposed to be his representative voice in the dispute. In his *Memoir*, McGahern gives the following description of his meeting with the General Secretary of the I.N.T.O., Mr. Kelleher,

The General Seceretary...who had also braced himself with whiskey, allowed his irritation with me [McGahern] to come to overcome his caution. ‘If it was just the auld book, maybe-maybe-we might have been able to do something for you, but with marrying this foreign woman you have turned yourself into a hopeless case entirely’, he said. ‘And what anyhow entered your head to go and marry this foreign woman when there are hundreds of thousands of Irish girls going around with their tongues out for a husband?’ he added memorably, especially since not many of them had been pointed in my direction.⁷⁰

That They May Face the Rising Sun also displays an attitude towards the church that borders on irreverence. The character of Joe Rutledge refuses to go to Mass because he no longer believes in the teachings of the church. This abstention from church on Rutledge’s part, however, is by no means as offensive as the character of Jamesie’s attitude towards religion. Jamesie does go to church but, as he himself admits, he only goes to “look at the girls. To see the whole performance” (*TTMFRS*. 2). By linking a religious service with a piece of theatrical art, Jamesie is echoing Canon Chasuble’s attitude towards his preaching which he regards as a scripted performance that needs to be tailored to a specific audience. This lack of respect for the authority of the church as exhibited by both Rutledge and Jamesie, shows that the Irish people in this novel are not representative of those that Mr. Casey in Joyce’s *Portrait* referred to as “an unfortunate priestridden race”.⁷¹ Flouting of religion and religious authority can also be discerned in

⁷⁰ John McGahern, *Memoir*, 251.

⁷¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

the story concerning John Quinn and his disrespect for the teachings of the church concerning matrimony. According to Jamesie: “He [John Quinn] delights in taking every woman he is with up into the front seat of the church, genuflecting and allowing her into the seat first, kneeling in adoration. You’d have to die at the performance” (*TTMFRS*, 35). In this fictive community, the only authority that counts is a personal, ethical standard that each individual applies to himself and himself alone. To attempt to impose one’s own code upon another is seen as an extreme error in manners.⁷²

The importance of civility and courtesy is so strong in this world that none of its inhabitants will utter an outright condemnation of John Quinn, despite the fact that he exhibits misogynistic and bullying tendencies. To castigate someone for how they choose to live and behave would be a betrayal of the code of individualism that is so important in this community. These people would almost certainly be in agreement with Wilde and his definition of selfishness: “Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live” (“Soul”, *CCW*, 1194). This intimate and enclosed world in which *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is set, follows the creed of Christ as defined by Wilde: “[T]he message of Christ to man was simply ‘Be thyself’. That is the secret of Christ” (“Soul”, *CCW*, 1179). Although characters like Joe Rutledge and Jamesie may personally find John Quinn disagreeable, it is conceivable that they accept what Wilde had always thought: “[A man] may commit a sin against society, and yet

⁷² Denis Sampson also discusses the role that manners play in the community in which *That They May Face the Rising Sun* exists. See Denis Sampson, “‘Open to the World’: A Reading of John McGahern’s *That They May Face the Rising Sun*”, *Irish University Review* 35.1 (Spring/Summer 2005). Special Issue on McGahern, 136-147.

realise through that sin his true perfection” (“Soul”, CCW, 1180). In assertions such as those, Wilde rejects the intrusion of societal laws into someone’s personal development and expression. A rejection that McGahern’s lakeside dwellers would almost certainly concur with. For this reason, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is populated by people with very distinct artistic tendencies because, as Wilde once argued: “The true artist is a man who believes absolutely in himself, because he is absolutely himself” (“Soul”, CCW, 1186).

In the case of the authority of the state and its institutions, John Quinn also provides an example of how such authority is not permitted to hold sway in this world. When he finds out that his children are being subjected to physical abuse in their school, John Quinn goes to their teacher and informs her that “if this ever happens again, I’m afraid it’ll go a lot further than this...Now my pair of little girls are coming back to school tomorrow and nothing like that must ever happen again. Don’t as much as lay a hand on those little girls” (*TTMFRS*, 33). John Quinn was indeed victorious in his battle with the state in the corporeal form of the teacher Missus Kilboy who returned to her classroom after her altercation with John Quinn clearly having been crying. It could be argued that the state exacted its own revenge on John Quinn because, although his children were never beaten again, they were also given no real attention or instruction from their teachers after that incident. Jamesie attempts to fix the moral on this story as being: “Let nobody try to best the guards or the doctors or the teachers. They have their own ways of getting back at you” (*TTMFRS*, 34). However, this act of petty revenge on the part of the school seems not to have materially affected the Quinn children in any notable fashion since, as we are

told in the succeeding lines, “It didn’t seem to hold any of the children back. They were strong for their years and as soon as they got to fourteen or sixteen they all hit for England...A few of them are now said to be millionaires” (*TTMFRS*, 36). In light of these facts, the exertion of state power by the school comes across as being merely a childish and futile gesture.

The issue of national politics is never allowed to attain a state of significant prominence in the world of this novel since that would be admitting into this enclosed environment a communal code that could only result in stifling the utopian individualism that exists in this micro-community. This attitude towards politics is first raised within the first twenty pages of the work when Rutledge says of his uncle, the Shah, that he has “always hated politics...I don’t think he has ever voted” (*TTMFRS*, 17). The spectre of national issues does to some degree haunt the book in the form of Jimmy Joe McKiernan, an I.R.A activist who, it is alleged, has performed various acts of violence in the name of Irish freedom. He is, however, a very liminal figure in the work who never takes centre stage in any of the episodes that are depicted in the novel. During the denouement of the novel, at the wake of Jamesie’s brother Johnny, McKiernan is kept upstairs for a large part of the event since it is felt that his presence would be a disturbing and disconcerting one for all concerned. Rutledge is given the assignment of looking after McKiernan and it is during this scene that the following exchange takes place. McKiernan takes Rutledge by surprise by saying:

‘You don’t seem to have any interest in our cause?’

‘No’ Rutledge said. ‘I don’t like violence’

‘You don’t believe in freedom then?’

‘Our country is [my italics] free’

‘A part of it is not free’

‘That is a matter for that other part. I don’t think it is any of our business’

(*TTMFRS*, 302).

This exchange seems to have bested McKiernan because he then asks Rutledge “do you have the time? My time is plainly untrustworthy” (*TTMFRS*, 302). This indicates McKiernan’s acceptance of the fact that he is out of step with the time he is living in and his acknowledgement of the fact that he is not accepted in the world that he inhabits. I would go so far as to argue that the judgement of this community on McKiernan would be akin to Lady Bracknell’s reaction upon hearing that her nephew’s friend, Bunbury, had been “exploded”: “Was he [Bunbury] the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr. Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so he is well punished for his morbidity” (*Earnest*, *CCW*, 408). The figure of McKiernan in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is a logical progression from the tragically anachronistic character of Moran in *Amongst Women*. While Moran was clearly an antiquated figure from a bygone age, he still took centre-stage in his world. In the case of *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, however, McGahern has created a world that has no place for either McKiernan or the prescriptive and violent ideals that he espouses. In the now carefully honed and refined artistic realm of McGahern’s fiction, the presence of the staunch Irish nationalist,

most clearly personified by the larger than life Citizen in the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses*, is now clearly not welcome.

One character in this book, who only makes a very brief appearance, seems to have been directly modelled on Wilde himself and as a result warrants discussion in this chapter. This character is Kate Ruttledge’s old employer in England, Robert Booth. The following description of Booth will demonstrate the similarities between himself and Wilde:

Scholarships took him all the way to Oxford...After the war he returned to take a double first in history and classics and then entered the law to discover that it wasn’t acceptable to practise at the Bar with a thick regional accent, so he took himself to acting school where he acquired the accent that would serve him for the rest of his life, its only flaw being that it outdistanced what it sought to emulate (*TTMFRS*, 158).

While Oscar Wilde certainly never spoke with a regional accent, he does share with Booth a brilliant academic career in Oxford where both studied classics. The two men both share an acknowledgement of the fact that, if you were Irish in England, you had to adopt a certain amount of affectation if you were going to be accepted. Like Wilde before him, the impression is given in the above passage that Booth managed to become more English than the English themselves. Booth’s prolonged stay in England also indicates that he became seduced by that country as Wilde had been before him. Yeats had explained the attraction that both England and the English had for the Irish when he said

that “To an Irishman...England is like fairyland”.⁷³ Wilde and Booth can be said to have gained a victory over the native English since they adopted a pose that was “the opposite of the stage-Irishman”,⁷⁴ a role that many of the native English would have been expecting them to embody.

Existence by the lake can be read as a persistent act of performance and creation of artifice in much the same way as Wilde’s *Earnest* never appears to be conforming to the realist genre of theatre and rather seems to revel in its artificiality. In *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Jamesie is the character who is identified first as a lifelong actor very early on in the work: “For [Jamesie], all forms of social intercourse were merely different kinds of play” (*TTMFRS*, 2). Jamesie sees his life as a succession of roles and artfully constructed theatrical scenes. This is evident from the manner in which in which he goes through the very identical routine every time he leaves the Ruttledge’s house as if he were a thespian who has been taught how to make an appropriate exit:

He passed and turned to bow low, ‘I never liked yous anyhow’ and cycled away (*TTMFRS*, 16).

Scenes such as these emphasise how Jamesie, like Wilde before him, is an exponent of the doctrine of Camp as defined by Susan Sontag: “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”.⁷⁵ This love of the theatrical and artificial world

⁷³ Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound and Auden* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 9.

⁷⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound and Auden*, 12.

⁷⁵ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”. *The Susan Sontag Reader*. Ed. by Elizabeth

is a major theme of *The Importance of Being Earnest* as encapsulated by the revelation at the play's close of how Miss Prism had accidentally left her three volume novel in the perambulator and had put the baby that was in her charge into the handbag where she had intended to dispose of her novel. With this inadvertent act of confusion, Miss Prism has “unwittingly replicated that privileging of art over life”.⁷⁶ All the major characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be read as living their lives as artfully constructed performances. Whether it is Cecily creating a fictitious love affair with her “cousin” Ernest by means of letters that only she is writing or Jack and Algy creating alter egos for themselves, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a play that has many mini-fictions existing inside it and no claim for reality can be made on any of their behalves in much the same way as reality and naturalness are not essential to the lives of the characters in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

Jamesie is by no means the only character in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* who conceives of existence as a series of performed vignettes. It is my contention that many of the characters in this work conceive of their lives as being akin to staged production. This is strongly suggested by the devotion to acting on stage that two of the male figures, Johnny and Patrick Ryan, profess to share. Both Johnny and Ryan had acted in Synge's seminal dramatic work, *The Playboy of the Western World*, a play that is memorably described by Jamesie's wife Mary as being “terrible eejity stuff” (*TTMFRS*, 101). Johnny was playing the lead in that play and fell in love with the actress who was playing the

Hardwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 105.

⁷⁶ Neil Sammells, “Oscar Wilde and the politics of style”. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama*. Ed. by Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 118.

love interest, Pegeen Mike. By attempting to replicate this fictional romance in real life, Johnny was unknowingly providing proof of the prescriptive power of art over life that Wilde had championed in “The Decay of Lying” and attempted to dramatize in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Johnny eventually was to make the fatal error of following this woman to England only to discover that she was in love with someone else. This suggests that the creation of glorious fictions and roles for oneself is only possible in the world that exists by the lake in this novel since it occupies an *inter regnum* between life and art in much the same way as the country does in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. By attempting to take his romantic fantasies into the cold world of reality, symbolised in this novel by England, Johnny was dooming himself to failure and disappointment. Despite the sad and tragic outcome of Johnny’s love affair, it does mark him out as a Wildean figure who feels that life should be made to imitate art.

The character of Patrick Ryan is given the line that seems to most accurately summarize the attitude of many of the characters in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* towards their existence: “There are times when I don’t know who I am from one minute to the next. That’s why I always liked the acting. You are someone else and always know what you are doing and why” (*TTMFRS*, 214). Joe Rutledge also displays some of the concerns that are characteristic of a performer when he states that “the way we perceive ourselves and the way we are perceived are often very different” (*TTMFRS*, 3). This line encapsulates an actor’s anxiety that his audience will fail to be convinced by his performance and strongly resembles Wilde’s greatest fear which is that he will cease to be misunderstood.

The subversion of gender binaries is a major part of this text and makes the case for a connection between it and *The Importance of Being Earnest* even more compelling. Declan Kiberd has argued that Wilde's art was "founded on a critique of the manic urge to antithesis, an antithesis not only between all things Irish and English, but also between male and female, master and servant, good and evil, and so on".⁷⁷ Nowhere in Wilde's oeuvre is this more apparent than in *The Importance of Being Earnest* where "it is the women who are businesslike in making shrewd calculations about the attractions of a proposed marriage while it is the men who are sentimental, breathless and impractical".⁷⁸ The reversal of gender codes in *Earnest* is exemplified by Gwendolen when she says that "the home seems to be to the proper sphere for the man" (*Earnest*, CCW, 397). That line, said with absolute seriousness, is an unashamed inversion of received societal wisdom which proclaims the home is the proper sphere for the *woman*. The marriage between Kate and Joe Rutledge in *That They May Face the Rising* is also suggestive of gender inversion because it is not founded on the usual principle of matrimony which is that the male is the domineering figure and the female is the submissive figure. Indeed, as Johnny points out, "she [Kate], probably wears the britches" (*TTMFRS*, 80). Patrick Ryan echoes this sentiment when he asserts that "they'd [the Rutledges] make you wonder whether they are man and woman at all" (*TTMFRS*, 80). Kate goes so far as to assert the primacy of the female perspective by her constant drawing of the landscape around her. She even insists on drawing Patrick Ryan which appears to make him uncomfortable. He eventually asks her: "Do you think you got any closer to the nature of the beast?"

⁷⁷ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 38.

⁷⁸ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 40.

(*TTMFRS*, 68). This question seems to indicate that Ryan is uncomfortable with the idea of his being probed by the female gaze and possibly fears misrepresentation by the gaze of one whom he would regard as ‘other’ to himself.

Jamesie is the character in this micro-world who most epitomises the gender inverted “womanly man”. His love of gossip and his devotion to the popular programme *Blind Date* mark him out as an extremely unmanly but they equally delineate him as the perfect example of the Wildean dandy. Whenever Jamesie arrives at the Rutledge’s house demanding to hear the latest gossip, he perfectly resembles Cecil Graham from *Lady Windermere’s Fan* who asserted that “gossip is charming! History is merely gossip” (*Windermere*, CCW, 451). By consuming such products of popular culture as *Blind Date*, Jamesie seems to have found the solution to the problem posed by Susan Sontag: “How to be a dandy in the era of mass culture”.⁷⁹ Jamesie’s repeated claim that there are no “mistress in this part of the world. Nothing but broken down gentlemen” (*TTMFRS*, 2), indicates that he sees himself in the role of the dandy as personified by the types of gentlemen that lived in nineteenth century England whom Wilde sought to emulate. The above quoted line also draws a link between the rural Irish peasant and the ruined Gaelic bards/aristocrats after the Flight of the Earls in 1607 when the old Irish aristocracy lost their power and positions. Declan Kiberd has highlighted the similarity between the English aristocrats of Wilde’s era and the Irish peasantry whose spirit survived in the works of Synge, Yeats and whom McGahern commemorates in *That That They May Face the Rising Sun*:

⁷⁹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp”, 116.

[Wilde discerned] some surprising affinities between the Irish peasantry and the English aristocracy—a love of leisure, a heightened sensitivity to the promises of language...The drawing room figures of Wilde's drama are really the shaughrauns and rogues of nineteenth century Irish writing brought indoors and civilised.⁸⁰

Wilde had also been the chronicler of the decline of a way of life in the same way as McGahern was to become. Wilde's gentlemen are in the process of becoming broken down as is evidenced in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when Algernon says that his Christian name "is rather an aristocratic name. Half the chaps who get into the bankruptcy courts are called Algernon" (*Earnest*, CCW, 396). Thus, Wilde and McGahern can be described as being elegists of the aristocratic class.

Any attempt on the part of the male characters in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* to assert hyper-masculine control over women always results in failure and a devaluing of the cult of masculinity. This is particularly true in the case of John Quinn who attempts to embody all of the stereotypical qualities of the domineering male and yet he always fails in this role and actually only succeeds in appearing comical. As Eamonn Hughes has observed of the character of John Quinn, he "is treated in the text as a brutal clown, sinister and yet to be laughed at, as so many of the characters do".⁸¹ Descriptions of John Quinn range from "Oh John Quinn is a boy. Women and more women" (*TTMFRS*, 25), to "John Quinn is a living sight" (*TTMFRS*, 26). Such observations concerning the man

⁸⁰ Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 396.

⁸¹ Eamonn Hughes, "'All That Surrounds Our Life': Time, Sex and Death in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*", 150.

demonstrate how he is a figure to be laughed at rather than feared. While some of Quinn's actions, such as forcing himself upon his first wife out in a field on the day of their wedding, are reprehensible, McGahern never allows him to acquire the stature of some of the men in his previous works (such as the father in *The Dark*) who are certainly to be both loathed and feared. Ultimately, Quinn meets his nemesis in a woman whom he marries as a result of an ad that he placed in the Knock Marriage Bureau. Despite being forced to endure John Quinn's brutal assertion of his conjugal rights in the hotel where their wedding reception was being held, this woman proved more than equal to Quinn when she walked out of the house a week after the marriage. Despite all the bullying and coaxing that Quinn attempted to bring to bear on the situation, he could not convince his new wife to return nor could he get any remuneration to compensate him for his loss. Quinn's appropriate downfall is described thus by the work's narrator: "John Quinn had circled and wheedled and bullied many in his search of advantage. Now he was being circled expertly" (*TTMFRS*, 183). As in Wilde's *Earnest*, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* endows women with almost femme fatale qualities and allows them the ability to gain the upper-hand in their battles with men. This is equally true in *Earnest* where Lady Bracknell exerts total mastery in her marriage without having to leave her husband to do so.

Patrick Ryan is another individual in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* who is prone to striking the pose of the indomitable male. He refuses to show any emotion when his brother is dying and revels in coarse language such as the repeated use of the word 'cunt' which betrays a certain level of misogyny in his psyche. Such hyper- masculine posturing

cannot go unchecked however, and Ryan suffers for attempting to adopt such an essentialist and stereotypical posture. This occurs when Ryan insists on going into an orchard where there are wild bees in order to relieve himself. His macho reasoning behind this ill-advised act is: “the bees won’t bother me. My hide is too hard” (*TTMFRS*, 74). Despite this assertion, he does get badly stung and is chased out of the orchard screaming “fuck those for fucken cunts of bees” (*TTMFRS*, 75). Both Patrick Ryan and John Quinn are thus akin to tragic figures whenever they embrace such a short-sighted identity as posing as the essentialist, domineering man. Ryan is the only character in this book who uses the word “cunt” (as is referenced above) and this can be viewed as his scripting for himself the role of the misogynist who views female genitalia as something to be referred to derogatorily. Given Ryan’s familiarity with the world of the theatrical and staged performances, this argument becomes very tenable.

Wilde’s own life, as well as his work, was played out as a challenge to any stable notions of gender. This aspect of Wilde’s character was very correctly picked up on by James Joyce and referred to in a lecture he wrote in 1909 in the Triestine publication, *Il Piccolo della Serra*, on Wilde’s play *Salomé*, in which he refers to Wilde’s “sexless intellect”.⁸² Wilde’s effeminate style of dress, his lecturing on “The House Beautiful” and his editorship of the women’s magazine, *Women’s World*, all combined to present him as a figure who refused to conform to the standards expected of men in Victorian England. Michael Foldy, in his book *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, has offered a radical theory of the

⁸² James Joyce, “Oscar Wilde: “The Poet of Salomé”. *James Joyce: Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*. Ed. by Kevin Barry (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2000), 205.

real reason behind why Wilde was tried twice for indecent practices and eventually incarcerated:

Certainly Wilde's sexual transgressions were significant, but they were significant primarily as the legal pretext under which his transgressions of gender could be addressed and punished.⁸³

Because Wilde refused to conform to the standards of manliness that his age valued highly, he needed to be made an example of.

That existence "by the Lake" in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is clearly a utopian one is evidenced by the fact that the characters who live there hate to leave even for a brief period of time. When Jamesie and Mary go to visit their son and his family in Dublin for Christmas, Jamesie is intent on getting home as soon as possible. This fact is made abundantly clear by his wife, Mary: "This fella was wild to be away...You know what he said when he saw that the train was coming into Longford? 'If the frigging thing breaks now we'll be able to walk home from here'" (*TTMFRS*, 220). The Shah undergoes a similar experience to Jamesie when he goes on a holiday with his niece and her children. Although he projected an outward appearance of enjoying himself, it was clearly a relief to him when his daughter said that she felt that it was time to go home. As she herself phrased it: "you should have seen the look on his face when I said that maybe we were there long enough: it was deliverance" (*TTMFRS*, 107). The description that is

⁸³ Michael Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: deviance, morality and late-Victorian society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 94.

given of the Shah going swimming everyday during the holiday and diving into the ocean “like a whale” (*TTMFRS*, 106), conveys the impression of him being like a fish out of water while he was away from his home. The people in this novel seem to be engaged in a permanent exercise of Bunburying by living in the country which provides them with a liberating space in which to express and perform their varied personalities unhindered. This vision of the country as being a paradise is epitomised in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as I have already discussed. McGahern seems to have taken this practice of Bunburying, a casual pastime in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and made it into a permanent lifestyle choice in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

John McGahern departs from the influence of Wilde in one significant manner which is that, although both Wilde and McGahern were Irish, Wilde felt the need to depict his utopia using England and the English upper-classes as his inspiration as opposed to McGahern who felt that his native country, so long a stifling influence on its inhabitants, was now a place from which a utopia could be envisaged. Because of Ireland’s colonial status, Wilde must have regarded exile as the most appropriate method of finding the utopia that was being stifled in his country of birth. In the Ireland of McGahern’s time, such a need no longer existed:

Major social and political changes were taking place in Ireland in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Heralded by the landmark Whitaker Report in 1958, there is a new emphasis on the development of an export based economy and the encouragement of multinational inward capital investment...The dismantling of economic autarky

in Ireland and the slow removal of a paternalistic state apparatus did not mean that the state had diminished in power, merely that its mechanisms for implementing social policy had changed.⁸⁴

Ireland was beginning to emerge as a place where individual freedom was valued as much as communal duties. This accounts for the emphasis in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* on the act of returning from exile. The Ruttlidges had lived in England for many years but when we first encounter them in this work, they have returned to their native homeland and refuse to go back to Britain, even when Robert Booth offers Kate her old job back. This reverse of movement from leaving Ireland to returning is noted with amazement by the exile Johnny who still refuses to stay in Ireland for a longer period than brief visits of a few weeks: “Strange to think of all the people that went out to England and America and the ends of the earth from this place and yon pair [the Ruttlidges] coming back against the tide” (*TTMFRS*, 80).

The tragedy for Johnny is that, in the present age, the prevailing tide is drawing the Irish back to Ireland and he is still refusing to be swept along by it. Johnny’s death at the end of the book symbolises the end of the era when Irish people such as Wilde and millions of nameless exiles had to leave Ireland to find better lives. These exiles or “Wild Geese” are given a lyrical and moving eulogy by the priest who conducts Johnny’s funeral:

⁸⁴ Quoted in Lionel Pilkington, “The Abbey Theatre and the Irish State”. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama*. Ed. by Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 240.

Johnny belonged to a whole generation of Irish people who had been forced into England to earn their bread...These people forced into England through no fault of their own were often looked down on...by some whose only good was that they managed to remain at home with little cause to look down on anybody (*TTMFRS*, 311).

McGahern's achievement in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is that he has created a utopia in a land that is normally reserved for bleak and negative depictions of life as evidenced in the work of authors such as Joyce and Patrick McCabe. Unlike Wilde, McGahern has no need to seek exile in order to create a dandy's holiday paradise. The materials are readily accessible to him in a more prosperous and accepting Ireland than had existed in the time of Oscar Wilde.

Wilde once wrote that "[i]n matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing" (*Earnest*; *CCW*, 406). John McGahern was to reiterate that sentiment in an interview with Denis Sampson in which he claimed that "all that matters to me is style".⁸⁵ The characters in *Amongst Women* and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* are all martyrs to a particular style. The women in *Amongst Women* master the styles and codes of their era and, by so doing, quietly subvert them. Moran is afflicted with only being able to act in the heroic style of his youth and thus lives his life in a state of paralysis. The characters in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* have transcended all societal and communal impulses and adopt whatever style and persona seems appropriate to their

⁸⁵ Denis Sampson, "A Conversation with John McGahern". *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 17.1 (July 1991), Special Issue on McGahern, 14.

individual selves. In both works, the characters are permanently in a state of affectation but they would probably argue that, as Algy said in *Earnest* “if you do not like affectation, I really do not see what you can like” (*Earnest*, CCW, 405). This chapter contends that, after the completion of *Amongst Women*, John McGahern found himself confronted with a problem: One which Peter Raby felt was posed by Wilde’s pre-*Earnest* society plays: “How do you find “a world fit for the dandy to live in”.⁸⁶ McGahern had shown how dandies could survive in a hostile world through mastery of social conventions in *Amongst Women*, but were such people not deserving of a world where their deep belief in individualism would be allowed to have a free reign without hindrance from prescriptive societal codes? Wilde’s solution to this problem was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, my argument is that McGahern’s was the world that he created in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. When he came to create the utopian world of his final novel, McGahern was arguably a convert to the Wildean theory that “[a] map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at” (“Soul”, CCW, 1185). This positive and life-affirming aspect of John McGahern’s psyche has enabled him to write about what Joseph O’Connor has called, “that rarest of Irish literary subjects: happiness”.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Terence Brown, “Introduction to the Plays”. *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994), 354.

⁸⁷ Joseph O’Connor, “John McGahern”. *The UCD Aesthetic* (Dublin: New Island, 2005), 188.